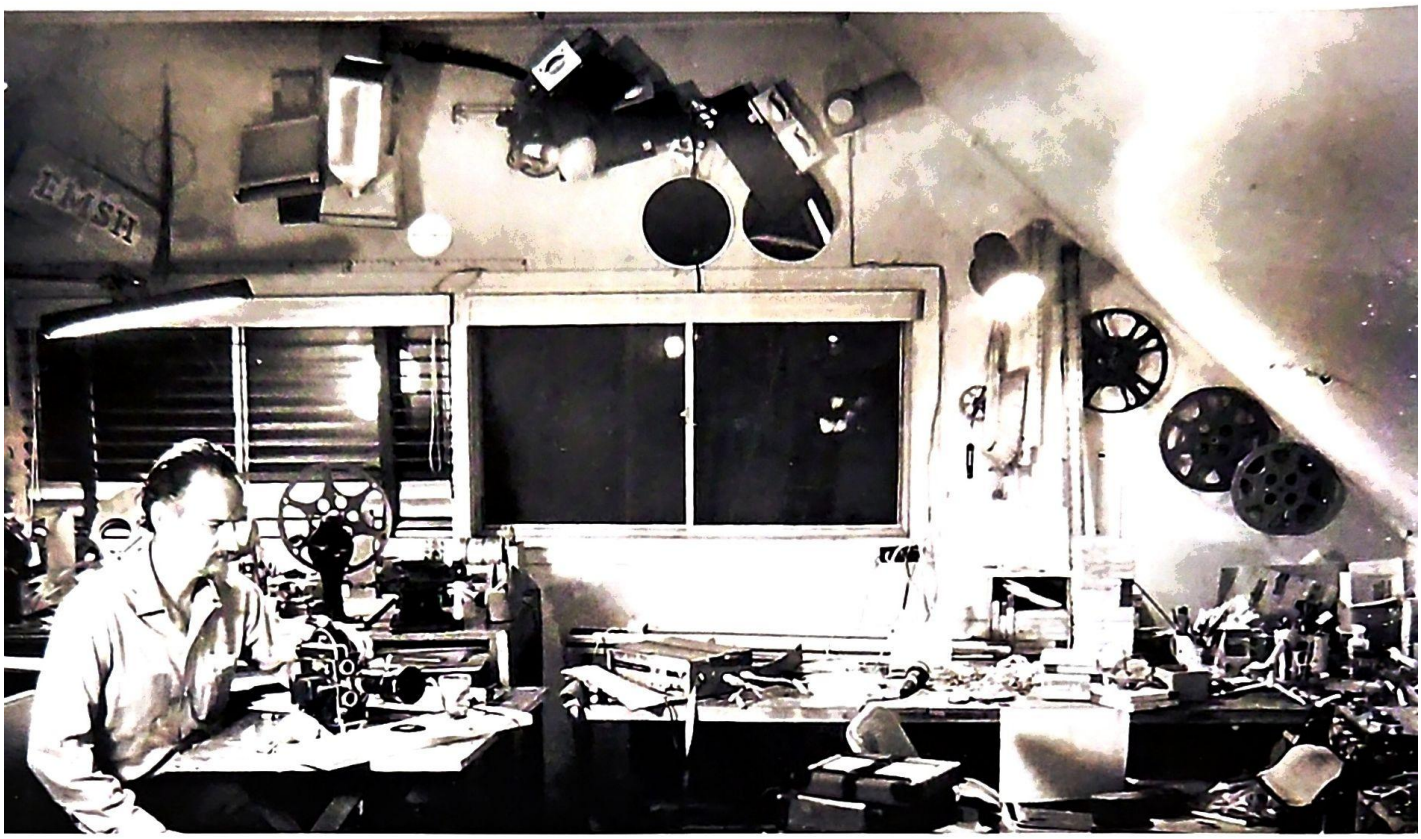
ED EMSHWILLER

LIFELINES



Ed Emshwiller in his studio (1966): Susan Emshwiller Archives

FILM CREDITS

DANCE CHROMATIC: Preserved by Anthology Film Archives in collaboration with Lightbox Film Center.

LIFELINES: Preserved by Anthology Film Archives in collaboration with Lightbox Film Center.

CAROL: Preserved by Anthology Film Archives

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TRANSFORMATION, THANATOPSIS and FILM WITH THREE DANCERS: Digitally restored by Re:Voir from original elements provided by MoMA

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ABOUT DAD

by Susan Emshwiller[1]

What can I tell you about Dad? I can only give bits, and only from my time with him and my perspective. So here goes…

Levittown is where I made my entrance into Dad's story. Close to the art scene of New York City, it was affordable housing for returning WWII veterans. My sister and brother and I grew up in that cookie-cutter neighborhood with decidedly non-cookie-cutter parents. Unlike other fathers on our street, Dad didn't put on a suit and go off to work. He stayed home and made art and that was definitely was not work.

Throughout his life he shifted his focus. First was painting and illustration.

In our house Dad had the two upstairs rooms as his studio. He would be there all day, painting or illustrating. Often as a child, I would watch him, sitting by his side as the piece slowly evolved, and occasionally reminding him not to put the paint brushes in his mouth. (I think he did that on purpose to have his little daughter remind him not to.) I learned to draw from that experience of watching. Always loved seeing the monsters or aliens he created.

For the Science Fiction cover paintings (sometimes for a short story of Mom's in the same publication), he would start by doing three or four small mock-ups. The editor would pick one and Dad would start the painting. Much later he told me that if you have to present options to a boss, always have one that isn't as good as the rest. The boss needs to assert their power and reject something. If you don't present that option, they may reject the one that you like most.

Good advice.

Dad would tape the edges of the illustration board with masking tape, do a faint outline drawing, and begin. Acrylics. Usually starting with the backgrounds, which he sometimes created by blocking areas with tape or rubber cement and then using an old technique of blowing the paint as a mist with an atomizer. As he worked, the details grew. The last bits were usually done with his thin brush carrying white for highlights on ray guns, planets, rockets, eyes, or slimy purple skin. He'd always hide his EMSH signature somewhere. The magical part was at the end when he peeled off the masking tape with all the excess paint strokes, revealing a crisp perfect white border.

Often Dad used photographs and magazine clippings as models for his paintings. If he saw a picture or advertisement in a publication, he'd cut it out and put it in a folder. He had a file cabinet full of collected images. Animals, planets, machinery, people… but he also used family and friends for models.

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1 This essay was commissioned and published as part of the exhibition catalogue for "Dream Dance: The Art of Ed Emshwiller" retrospective at LightBox in Philadelphia. Oct 2019

Dad would take polaroids of folks in specific action poses for paintings. Mom was a handy model for many of Dad's works and, as is common among artists, Ed's handiest model was himself. Altered versions of Dad's visage abound. Our next-door neighbors, the Griffiths, graced a few covers including with their son, Bill Griffith of Zippy the Pinhead fame.

Then came the shift to film.

Dad began experimenting with film while continuing to do commercial illustration. He started by animating his abstract paintings. Later he covered the attic with thick black paper for his "black box" film work.

As we three kids played Cowboys and Indians, Cops and Robbers, Dad played in his studio. For *Relativity,* he made a cave; a wood and chickenwire structure covered with Papier-mâché, dirt, rocks, with a decayed rubber doll embedded in the mix.

"Little girl, what does your daddy do?"

I'd answer, "He's an underground avant-garde filmmaker," having no idea what that meant.

Dad was quite focused on making art, but he didn't neglect us kids when he was free. He taught us how to use tools, throw a ball over the house, dig a trench around a tent, he cooked Spam with cream cheese, and of course we played with drawing and filmmaking. He animated a hand-drawn cartoon to accompany the 45rpm record of "Quacky the Little White Duck." He was patient and kind when we were in his focus.

Our house had scratchy South American tapestries on the couch, mismatched furniture, books, musical instruments, a guineapig-iguana-mouse-horneytoad-snake-cat menagerie, photographs and original art everywhere, articles from esoteric, scientific, or arty magazines lying open, mail-order health-food catalogues on top of bills on top of Newsday papers. We didn't live in filth, but the house was cluttered and in-flux. Things were in use, set down for a moment, mid-paragraph, abandoned, sometimes forgotten.

Mom and Dad would sometimes read articles to each other and discuss their art projects, but I didn't pay attention. It was the white noise of my childhood. They didn't watch television much, and only allowed us kids certain programs. We were "out of the loop" from our classmates, having not seen the latest episode of *Hogan's Heroes* or *Gilligan's Island.* We went to sleep to the sounds of Dad's moccasins creaking the upstairs floor and Mom's typewriter clacking on the dining room table. With the kids dreaming, Mom finally had quiet time to write Science Fiction stories.

Both Mom and Dad had been through the Great Depression and remembered bean sandwiches or spaghetti without sauce. We had "hand-me-downs" and old furniture and didn't have any of the trendy in-clothes or desperately-yearned-for latest toys. But classes for guitar, acting, tap dance, concertina—instruments, experience, and equipment—there was money for that.

Ed Emshwiller in his studio (1968): Susan Emshwiller Archives

Money was spent on art or art equipment, not on clothes, dining out, or other non-essentials.

We didn't eat out much as a family when I was growing up, but when we did, the most regular haunt was Howard Johnson's. While we waited for the food to be served Dad and I would flip over our placemats to the unprinted side and start drawing. A few lines to create a face or hand or machine part and then we'd exchange them. We'd add on to each other's drawing, creating bizarre creatures or part-human part-machine part-toilet-plunger. It was great fun and I was happy for our way of connecting.

When Dad needed a money infusion he might do an illustration, but as his film work became better seen and known, he was able to leave the illustration behind. To make ends meet, he got jobs as a cinematographer: *Time of the Heathen, Hallelujah the Hills, The Existentialist, Painter's Painting,* etc. He received grants: National Endowment for the Arts, Guggenheim, Ford Foundation etc. He did visiting-artist gigs at colleges and universities. I'm still amazed that Dad was able to pursue his passion, raise three kids and send them to college, all as a free-lance artist.

Whenever Dad finished a film he would have screenings at our Levittown house. Artists, filmmakers, writers, dancers came in from the city: Jonas and Adolfas Mekas, Carmen D'Avino, Red Grooms, Stan Vanderbeek, Stan Brakhage, Alwin Nikolais, Murrey Lewis, Yvonne Rainer, Amos Vogel. Not to

invade the adult space, we kids would sit on the stairs and watch. For me, I always viewed my Dad's films knowing these were "grownup" films and I wouldn't understand them. This was not at all frustrating, only reality. I'd let the images and sounds wash over me. In hindsight, this may be the ideal frame of mind for viewing experimental films: not looking for meaning.

Dad was an amalgam of improvisationally artistic and methodically organized. In those days he often edited in the camera, creating his own meticulously designed double exposures. He'd shoot one part, make a template of that image, then rewind the film in camera to the exact footage, line up the next shot based on the template, and shoot the other image. It's seen in the dancer in the black spaces between paintings of *Dance Chromatic.* The dancer and stationary face (my Aunt Becky and Uncle Mac) at different speeds as in *Thanotopsis.* He never knew if the shot worked until it was developed at the lab. But he had faith in himself that he'd done the figuring. And when he'd done figuring, he was smart enough to make handy crib-sheets on the back of cameras for exposure, footage-to-time, marks on wooden rulers with linear designations of seconds of 16mm film, where to put the sync pop for Picture Start...so he wouldn't have to do the figuring again.

Dad was proud of his work and strived to constantly be in the avant-garde, always looking for the new. He experimented. Tried unknown techniques. Stanley Kubrick saw Dad's film *Relativity* and asked him to work on the final speed/dream sequence of 2001. I don't know the reason, but Dad declined.

A Dad story. When he was shooting *Project Apollo* and was at a Cape Canaveral launch, he had his long lens like all the rest of the news crews, photographers, etc. And as the countdown began he realized everyone was going to take the same shot, so he turned his camera to the others and as the rocket rose into the sky, he got those hundreds of lenses rising to follow it. The shot no one else got.

Video came next.

At times I was annoyed by being part of his art. Not as a child in *Hallelujah the Hills,* or the little girl in *Relativity,* but in *Family Focus.* I was in high school and he had that video camera going all the time. Months and months. It felt like a horrific intrusion to a self-conscious teen. I was upset that everything—my phone chats, High School graduation, driving lessons—were exposed to the world. I felt he was "missing" all these events by hiding behind the camera, being there—but not there. When I saw the final form, with all the video manipulation and distortion, I said to him, "Why didn't you show me what you were going to do? I wouldn't have been so mad!"

Every ten years or so, Dad's vision would shift. Painting and illustration to avant-garde experimental film to video to computer-generated work to multi-media performance pieces and teaching. I always see this flexible life path as one of the greatest lessons Dad gave by example.

His precedent freed my mind from limitations for my own trajectory. It is a great way to stay engaged with learning new things, not grow stale or predictable, and take risks.

Dad was improvisational and structured at the same time. Organized and Free. Pragmatic and fanciful. Precise and scientific—not sloppy. An explorer going off to the unknown, but with all the navigational instruments he might need.

However, his immediate external world didn't seem that important to him. He did have a few paintings and stills from his films on display downstairs in our Levittown house, but there were no pictures or memorabilia upstairs in his studio. I remember arriving to live with him after he'd started at Cal Arts. The secretaries had been tasked with furnishing his apartment. He lived with those ugly floral couches and dull Sears decor for years. His cars and clothes were all utilitarian. Jeans and farmer shirts and L.L. Bean moccasins were his norm. Nothing, apart from his beard and long hair and ideas, were particularly "arty." And yet, he'd surprise. After smoking an infrequent offered cigar he might find his shirt singed with a burn mark. Rather than reject the damaged shirt, he'd embroider a caterpillar patch over the spot.

He was very interested in science, technology, and computers; perhaps influenced by his father, Errol Emshwiller—who worked for the U.S. patent office, wrote his thesis on Thermodynamics, and was an inventor. I remember visiting Dad one day while he was at CalArts. He looked up from his little Atari computer and exclaimed proudly, "I taught it to count to ten!"

As a person, Dad was very patient. He was steady, supremely capable, self-reliant, and measured. He thought before speaking. Dad had an attitude of competence, confidence, and unwavering assumption that he could do anything he put his mind to. I am so glad to have grown up with that, for it taught me to assume—all is possible.

Yet with his confidence he was not self-important, he allowed others to shine and supported all exploration and trying. He didn't yell or belittle people and preferred to resolve disagreements through reasonable discussion, not arguing or fighting. Dad was a peacemaker. He wrote an essay to warring film groups for "Peace, brothers!" However as he was part of his generation, he wasn't adept at expressing his feelings. We were both in Southern California after I'd graduated from CalArts and whenever we got together his first words were usually "How's the car running?" "How's your old dog?" Now, in hindsight, I know it was his way of saying he cared about me and my life.

Sometimes he acted in films and you can see his playfulness. Besides being the cinematographer on the Mekas film *Hallelujah the Hills*, he played the lecherous "Gideon." In my brother's film "Jr. Star Trek" he was a ogreish alien in fur.

What did he do when not making art? He liked taking drives, especially when he got to Southern California with its dramatic geology and landscapes. I'd often meet him on a weekend to drive, explore, maybe hike. We'd always stop

at whatever remote Mom 'n' Pop Diner we could find. Have burgers or chili. He'd read magazines: *Scientific American* (loved Quarks and physics!), *Psychology Today*, *Ms Magazine*, *Paris Review*... I don't remember him reading books so much. We'd go camping as a family. And finally, late in life, his favorite pastime became flying. He'd always wanted to learn and finally started taking lessons at 60 years old, flying Cessna single-prop planes around Southern California. When he died we scattered his ashes from the plane. Remind me to warn of the issues of doing that.

Dad had a few well-worn stories and one I always loved took place after WWII had ended. Dad was a Second Lieutenant in the Army in Trieste, Italy and was in charge of one of the regular prisoner exchanges. When the opposing side's officer was handed the exchange papers by Ed, the man balked. "These aren't official! I can only work with official documents!"

"These are official," Ed assured the man.

"Impossible! There is no stamp!"

Dad was aware that the Germans and Italians were used to having every paper officially stamped. He indicated for the man to wait, hurried to his tent, pulled a cork from a bottle of wine, carved U.S. in the bottom of the cork, dipped the end in the red wine, and stamped the paper.

Upon his return, he presented the paper. The officer nodded, clicked his heels and the prisoner exchange took place.

Dad said he only realized later that he was in such a hurry he forgot to carve the letters backwards, but—it didn't seem to matter.

I think he loved solving problems. He loved imagining an outcome and figuring ways to execute it. By virtue of thinking of the outcome, he felt there must be a way of making it manifest. This allowed him to use mediums in unique ways.

At California Institute of the Arts he once told me solving problems as dean of the film school was like "taking a tray at a cafeteria. You remove one and another pops up in its place."

But he loved working and teaching there. He loved engaging the students and I believe he was happy that some felt he was their "guru."

And he loved making art. On his death bed at the hospital he was looking around the room with wonder, exclaiming, "This is incredible animation! I could use this in the next project!"

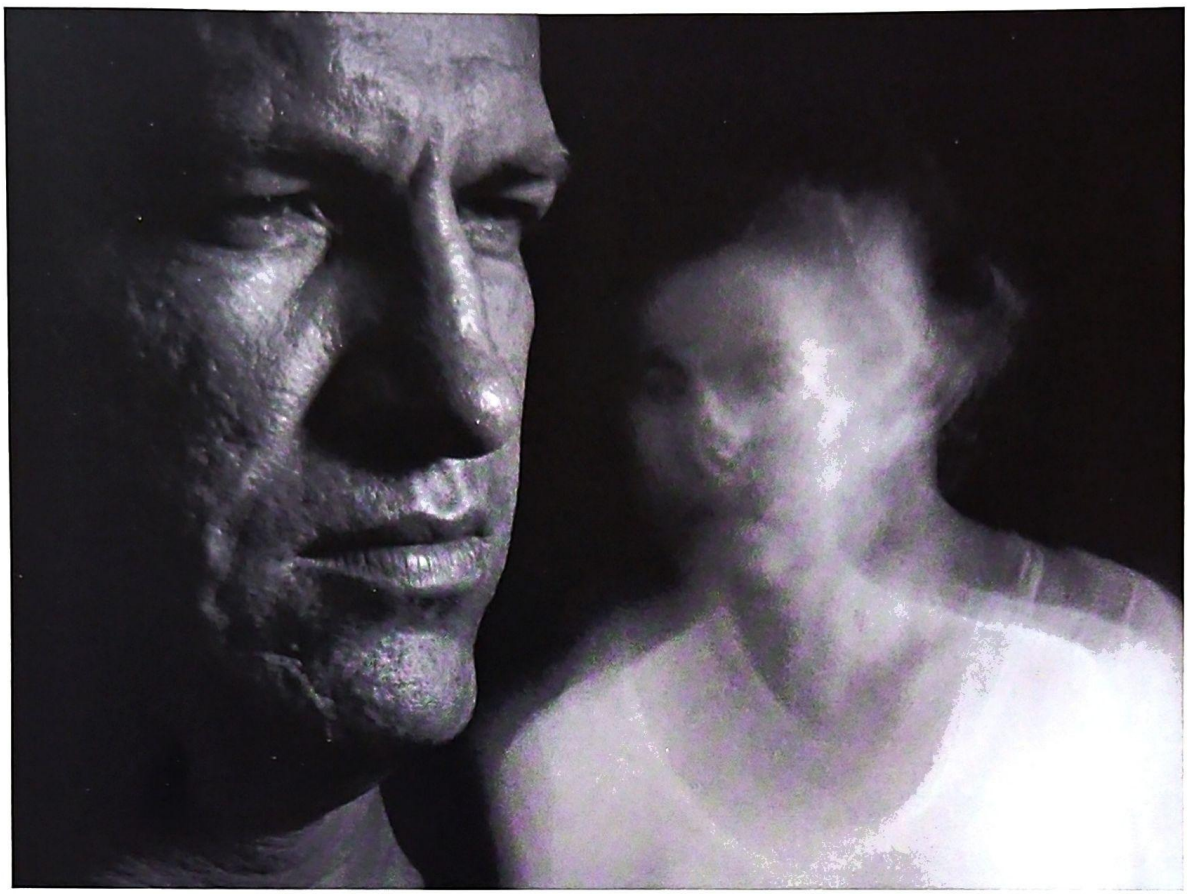
He had a great laugh that everyone who knew him remembers.

I wish I had more years with him. I wish I could have talked with him as the adult I am now. Still, I can conjure him up imagining that gap-toothed, white-moustache-filtered laugh. Cooking lamb and smelling the musky, oily, pleasantness. Walking with swinging arms in a military cadence. Knowing I am here now, doing what I do, being who I am, competent and inventive, because of him.

LIFELINES 1960 7 min. 16mm

Ed Emshwiller Self-portrait (1954): Susan Emshwiller Archives

THANATOPSIS 1962 5 min. 16mm



TOTEM 1963 16 min. 16mm

ED EMSHWILLER
Biography and film notes compiled by R. Bruce Elder

Among the great challenges confronting a writer who attempts to introduce the woefully neglected artistic contributions of Ed Emshwiller to a new audience is that Emshwiller was many things: an abstract expressionist painter, a graphic artist (a sci-fi illustrator who stood in the first rank of that profession), a filmmaker, a video artist, a computer graphics pioneer, a teacher and art college administrator, and an organizer-participant in multi-media happenings. But perhaps the greatest challenge is that his work — even if we restrict our field of interest to his filmmaking — invites many different critical approaches and, considered under every one of these approaches, his work achieved the status of a paragon. Yet, their exemplary standing has gone utterly unrecognized among film historians: Emshwiller's contributions to film art are so utterly novel, so sweeping in their implications, so rich, and so various that, to avoid the signal difficulties of addressing the ramifications of this wide-ranging bounty, commentators on Emshwiller's films have reduced him to an unfortunate caricature: that of a technical virtuoso. Hoping to counter this, I hope to present Emshwiller's films as works that use particular attributes of the medium to create projections of states of mind: so considered, a maker's task is to identify with the technology of the languages of art (that is, those languages' ways of intervening in and shaping the world we experience). In the current epoch of the technical image, this happens only through dialogue with our spiritual machines — hence, we must make the creative process the primary desideratum in critical writing and deem the object of art to be mind-creating. I also think of his work as a radical form of modernism, one that celebrates the loss of the self that follows on a thorough-going identification with medium (this seems to be what the critic, filmmaker, and arts activist Jonas Mekas most admired about Emshwiller's work). Further, I offer the conception that his films are a response to the march of history, which, since (at the latest) the Seventeenth Century has increasingly valorized reason and technology over the capacity to create and use symbols as in ritual, myth, and dream.[1] Against that tendency, Emshwiller (along with many other visual artists and poets), tried to reawaken more primal states of consciousness and, thus, to re-enchant reality.

I also highlight the poetic quality of his work: specifically, I argue that Emshwiller's work aimed at displaying poetic thinking — not his personal emotions, but the generalized form of human feeling (i.e., the "virtual shape" of the emotion) — into a symbolic, non-discursive "art symbol" that serves as a vehicle for insight into the nature of subjective experience, allowing for a deeper

1 See the last chapter of Suzanne Langer, "The Fabric of Meaning" in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 216—48

understanding of the world and of human consciousness that discursive language cannot fully capture. Moreover, what is perhaps the most radical (and completely unacknowledged) aspect of Emshwiller's œuvre is to see them as examples of the interest in Romantic science that was such a strong feature of modernist art in New York at that time.[2] The remarkable ferment in the arts in NYC in the 1950s were certainly a factor that should be considered when attempting to assess how Emshwiller's art achieved its multifaceted richness (and this, too, is under appreciated: remarkably little has been published on the real influence of Cinema 16, Maya Deren's Creative Film Foundation, which awarded prizes to several of Emshwiller's early films, and The Artists' Club, a group of progressive artists, critics and poets associated with the New York Studio School in the 1950s which Ed and Carol Emshwiller frequented).

Ed Emshwiller was born in Lansing, Michigan in 1925. His father Errol taught engineering and physics and was an inventor. Ed served in the US military after high school, studied design and graphic arts and then spent a year in Paris on the G.I. bill in 1949-1950. He shot his first films in Paris, home movies with his young wife Carol who also was in Paris on a Fulbright. In Paris he started experimenting with filming in short bursts to speed up the city, using his father-in-law's Filmo camera. He joined cine-clubs and attended screenings at the French Cinematheque.

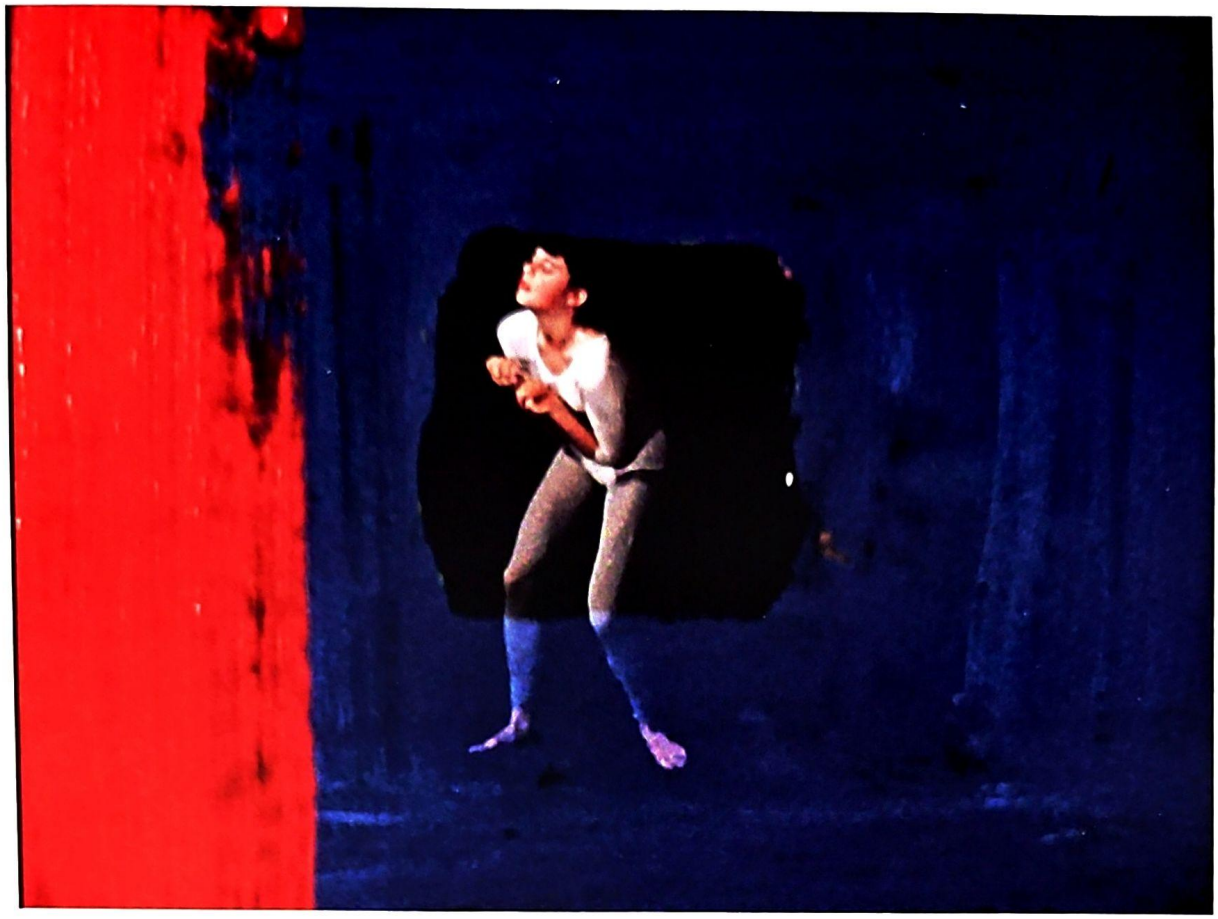
After studying graphics at Paris's *École des Beaux Arts*, Emshwiller began a distinguished career as a science fiction artist in 1951, creating hundreds of covers and illustrations for magazines over a fifteen-year period and for which he won several awards.

In 1952, he began experimenting with film "doodles," animation, and documenting the evolution of his paintings. *Dance Chromatic* was released in 1959, followed by another 25 films in the next eleven years, then videotapes (beginning in 1972 with the projects he undertook as an artist-in-residence at the Television Laboratory at Channel 13); and for the following twenty years, he created mixed-media works.

He was also a teacher, dean and provost at CalArts throughout the 1980s. He died of cancer in 1990 at the age of 65.

2 See especially Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1948). Weiner traced "intelligence" back to the cybernetic feedback loop.

DANCE CHROMATIC 1959 7 min. 16mm



Dance Chromatic (1959, 7 min)

When I decided to make my first film, I knew I wanted to combine animated paintings with images of a dancer. As a painter, I could create rhythm, movement, transformation and spatial tensions through abstract animation. Working with a dancer, I could introduce into those formal concepts the human element.[3]

Stan Brakhage recounted that in 1960, he had received a telephone call from Maya Deren. He had been surprised to receive a call from Deren, since she, like Stan, was very poor at the time, and could scarcely afford to make a transcontinental telephone call; furthermore, she and Stan were not on the best of terms at that moment. But she felt compelled to tell Stan about "a great new discovery": Emshwiller's *Dance Chromatic*. This anecdote led Brakhage to comment on that film and its foreshadowing characteristics of Emshwiller's later work. He noted Ed's consistent effort to "straddle two and sometimes three worlds in various works." I believe that what Stan meant by this was that each work incorporated various forms of mark-making and was built on the interaction of a variety of codes.

At a talk he gave in 1974, entitled "Image Maker Meet Video, or, Psyche to Physics and Back," Emshwiller made the following comments about the variety of mediums and forms he had worked with, which, I believe, is the richest and most detailed theoretical statement Emshwiller gave of his working method:

3 Cited in Amy Greenfield, *Filmdance 1890s—1983* [New York, NY: The Elaine Summers Experimental Media Foundation, 1983], 25.

I have spent much of my life making images; and for anybody else to see them, of course, these images must take some physical form, and the physics of any medium defines the characteristic limits of possible forms. This fascinates me. I've worked in paint, film, and video, and it is the way in which an action you take leaves its mark that seems particularly interesting about each medium; how different tools require different actions; how similar actions taken with different tools have different results. A coarse hog's bristle brush is quite different from a soft red sable brush. They make you paint differently. They leave different marks even if you use the same stroke. You may prefer the feel of one over the other or you may like the demands one makes over the other, or you may like the results of one type of stroke or action over the other. You may, in fact, be a sable brush painter or, on the other hand, you may be a copper plate engraver, or a 16mm sync-sound filmmaker, or a 1/2-inch Portapak videotape maker or a 2-in. high-band-color-chroma-keyed-synthesizer-modified-videotape maker. Each has its own feel, its own demands, its own mark. I enjoy discovering for myself what it feels like to be making different kinds of marks with different kinds of tools...

Not only do the tools make their own marks, but each individual artist is like a different tool. Each person leaves his own mark. Therefore, I have central shapes, forms and themes that are my signature and follow me whether in painting or film or video.

In order to begin a work, I always find it useful, in fact necessary, to have one or more concepts or themes to explore. These initial themes or concepts enable me to begin a work and make up a highly flexible base or armature onto which I can add further reflections, intuitive moves, improvisations and responds to the demands of the medium... I find [great] satisfaction in discovering a form or finding a pattern and rhythms which can bring focus and intensity to a work... In some way [the work's] elements should relate to each other through form, affectively and effectively, in a way that doesn't happen in random relationships. The search for this form is, for me, one of the main reasons for making any given work. Each work becomes a process of discovery, a learning experience, and usually the finished product is far removed from the original impulse.[4]

Transformation (1960, 5 min)

Having no preconception except a sense of constant change and continuity and rhythm, I painted and drew a series of visual abstractions letting each development suggest what followed. Varied techniques in art and animation were used to see how they would work together. "Finding" a film in this way is more exciting for me than "finding" a painting.[5]

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4 Ed Emshwiller, from a talk entitled "Image Maker Meet Video, or, Psyche to Physics and Back," part of MoMA's landmark Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television, 1974.

5 *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*, ed. Scott MacDonald [Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002], p. 383.

Lifelines (1960, 7 min)

In this film I have tried to express various aspects of the title, using animated lines, a hand, and a nude model. The main problems to solve were to strike a balance in the use of symbols having quite different impact so that they worked together (a live figure often tends to dominate over the artwork), and to use the symbolism effectively in an abstract form. Although still primarily interested in abstract film-making, I enjoyed the attempt, in this work, to incorporate more literal meaning.[6]

Thanatopsis (1962, 5 min)

When the dancer is used in filmic terms, rather than dance terms, space and time are flexible. The images projected on the screen may seem to move forward and backward in time, may be discontinuous, in fast motion, slow motion, frozen, repetitious, or simultaneous. The dancer can appear to shift instantaneously from one location to another, can be compressed, elongated, distorted, or seen from widely varying perspectives. (...) So, in some cases, two choreographies are united in one film — dance choreography and film choreography. In other cases, dance choreography in the usual sense is practically non-existent. Then the camera and editing techniques provide the movement, contrasts, and suggestions in the dancer's image. (...) I can make films with dancers that satisfy my need to work in abstract, visual terms, yet (...) seem more meaningful than pure forms and colors.[7]

Totem (1963, 16 min)

A common feature of Emshwiller's work is a tension between stasis and dynamic flow. The combination of animation or single-framing and dance (often abstracted dance movements) can be seen in his early films *Dance Chromatic*, *Thanatopsis*, *Transformation*, and *Lifelines*.

Emshwiller's transformations of the episodic, slow-motion tableaux of Alwin Nikolais's performances develop that system of tensions even more tautly, for here the transformations are accomplished by using extraordinarily fluid camera movements. Emshwiller referred to *Totem*, *Fusion*, and *Chrysalis* as films being based on choreography by Alwin Nikolais as seen by Ed Emshwiller.

Emshwiller's program note for *Totem* emphasizes the startling connection between ritual forms, community, tableaux ("block") construction and kaleidoscopic images:

Primordial mysteries, earth, fire, water, rituals and community ties. The dancers are seen at first as motifs in a frieze; then as strange, subterranean, headless creatures; finally as random beings that appear and disappear, becoming superimposed and interchangeable. A sextet moves rhythmically through images of water and waving weeds. A hoop duet

6 *ibid*, p. 385

7 Transcript published in *The New Television: A Public / Private Art* [Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1977], 53-57.

culminates in a crescendo of flames and massed figures. The dancers form highly textural patterns of mirror images, culminating in a series of kaleidoscopic implosions.

George Dumpson's Place (1964, 8 min)

In the film, Dumpson's overgrown "place" on Long Island is a densely textured mystery of broken dolls, ruined sculpture, and tangled housewares, a world of uncertain boundaries between rural and urban landscapes, interior and exterior spaces, investigated through the sinuous tracking shots for which Emshwiller was noted.

I have already commented on a device that Emshwiller frequently used: creating a "cinematic space" by sweeping a hand-held wide-angle lens over the subject he is filming. The device creates an effect similar to anamorphosis — an ingenious perspective technique that gives a transformed image of the subject, as though, for example, it were seen in a curved mirror. Most of the segments in *George Dumpson's Place* are shot with this "flying camera" technique. Emshwiller was extraordinarily graceful in his movements, and his camera glided over (mostly closeup views of) faces of statues, broken dolls, and a framed photo (likely a found object) — it captured Dumpson's private world, and created a portrait of Dumpson's inner world through presenting the objects he collected, without ever showing us, until very near the end, Dumpson's face (the very thing we would expect to see in what is, in the end, a portrait film). And, like a journey through the mind, through one's consciousness of his own place in the world, *George Dumpson's Place* uses the juxtaposition of resonant particulars to suggest an interior space: this is the power of the collage — a collection of images of things can become a depiction of the internal world.

Relativity (1966, 38 min)

I was working on 6 or 7 different ideas for short films... and one was the idea of penetrating space in a kind of flying camera, a dream of flying, a kind of sensual, sexual imagery where you were constantly going into an unknown space and new, unknown things were constantly appearing that you had to deal with. Another idea was based on reading Isaac Asimov, who was dealing with the limits of our knowledge in time and space, and this film dealt with an awareness of our perceptual limitations. And another idea was man-woman relationships in sexual terms...

[I wrote a proposal] saying I'd like to do something that deals with subjective reality, the emotional sense of what one's perception of the total environment is — sexual, physical, social, time, space, life, death — all of those things. A journey through the mind, through one's consciousness of his own place in the world.[8]

8 Gayla Jamison, "An Interview with Ed Emshwiller," *Filmmakers Newsletter* 11, 1 [November 1977]: 22.

Emshwiller received a Ford Foundation grant that allowed him to make a longer film than he had previously been able to afford. That led to his working in "blocks," as he began juxtaposing segments that were made up of material that conflicted or were opposed to one another, that had different relations to the basic thematic material. His application for the Ford Foundation grant gives a sense of the thematic material:

> *Man alone; isolated in hole, in empty space, separation of walls. Man as animal; insect eating insect, fighting rhinos, romping kids and monkeys. Man to woman; at mother's breast, courtship dance, sexual embrace. Man to society; marching en masse, piling bricks, nude in marketplace. Man in time and space; life span in 24 frames (one second), the life span and size of a microbe, life of a star.*
>
> *It would start as the probings of an individual in what seems to be a deep underground pocket. He seeks clues to his identity and location. As the film goes on, he seeks contact with others. He mentally travels, searches, tries to communicate, enters into relationships with individuals and groups. All the while he is isolated. Then his fantasies take off from the few artifacts confined with him. A doll's arm, a page from a magazine, a broken hammer. He is an artist who molds his dream companions, a dancer who moves through the love and pain in life, a scholar who works with pieces of the knowledge of man. He tries to find, from his blind viewpoint, where he fits in the universe.*[9]

This basic frame ties together the various segments — or, better, the root metaphor, for the film. This root metaphor pairs a sense of a *mysterium fascinans* with a *mysterium tremendum*. That is, it pairs a feeling for the miracle of creation twinned the genesis of consciousness, of life and death, of man's striving both to understand and conquer ignorance with a sense of awe mixed with terror at the vastness of the universe, and of the mind's inability to comprehend (to "hold together") the astonishing varieties of scales and types in the universe and the irresistibility of the vast forces which have shaped the enormous world of which we are a tiny part, that the smallness of the human mind and the human imagination is not up to fathoming the wild plethora of urges and reckless, abundance of dynamic forms that animate the cosmos.

Some "blocks" in *Relativity* famously make use of sweeping camera movements — long, smooth, hand-held tracking shots that join radically diverse forms into a seamless, sensuous flux of pattern and form, of color and texture, using clashing oppositions, collocated dislocations, and disparities to create new meanings. Among these shots were several wide-angle, hand-held shots that surged towards a computer. These were made while Emshwiller was working as cinematographer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, on *The Quiet Takeover*, a dystopic documentary on the computer's takeover of the corporate world. The documentary's director, Jack Willis, recalls, "Ed, during our

9 Cited in Luis Ortiz, *Emshwiller Infinity x 2: The Art and Life of Ed and Carol Emshwiller* [New York, NY: Nonstop Press, 2007], p. 122.

breaks, taking the lens, and swooping that camera over the giant computers, pushing it in and out, swish panning, winding the film back, shooting again, creating multiple exposures."[10]

Relativity was something of a breakthrough film for Emshwiller, and among its novel features was that the filmmaker used a speaking voice for the first time. He outlined his reasons for introducing a narrator:

> *Many filmmakers seem to have come to the medium from the world of literature. They were storytellers first — writers who later seem to have discovered images. For me, filmmaking was the other way around. I came to film as a creator of images and only now am I discovering the word. But my use of the word is not to give structure to the work. It serves, rather, as another element in the composition, a texture, an aspect of the environment. (...) For example, the human voice giving forth bits from the library of human knowledge, as in Relativity, can be symphonic in its emotional impact.*[11]

As Parker Tyler points out, *Relativity* "deals with much the same sort of material as *Finnegans Wake*, in that it shows us the night-life and death of the ordinary Little Man and telescopes both life and death into the dream state. (...) *Relativity* creates a fluid, shifting kind of vision that is more relevant to Joyce's visually kaleidoscopic prose."[12]

RELATIVITY 1966 38 min. 16mm

10 *ibid*, p. 123.

11 *ibid*, p. 125.

12 *Underground Film*, 194.

Carol (1970, 5 min)

In a question-and-answer session following a screening of *Carol Emshwiller in a Film by Ed Emshwiller* and *Film with Three Dancers*, Emshwiller commented on his use of abstraction, diverse sorts of images and sound, and on juxtaposition (or collage):

> *Usually when I make a film I am [concerned] about many different things. One of the things that fascinates me currently is ways of seeing, whether it is irony, humor, formal relationships, human interest (...) a whole raft of different ways of looking at things. And for my own handling of the material I find I can work in blocks. (...) To me, those are like parts of a collage that are different aspects of the same material. They in total become something different than those separate entities.*[13]
>
> *In terms of juxtaposing the various tensions I am interested in — formal tensions in the structuring of the film, archetypal thematic considerations, interpersonal, idiosyncratic non-controllable elements — finding my way through these things, giving myself the focus to have a direction of sorts, but not to confine myself, giving myself the identification of a problem. In this case I am looking for (...) an environment that will permit me to explore relationships.*[14]

Film with Three Dancers (1970, 20 min)

Robert Haller, one of Emshwiller's foremost champions, remarks, "In *Film with Three Dancers* Emshwiller filmed his sensual, sexual imagery with a flying camera, entering into the images of the bodies of his dancers, slipping into their subjective sense of the body as self-contained worlds."[15] Regarding Emshwiller's filmdance works, Gerald O'Grady notes: "Especially in *Film with Three Dancers*, Emshwiller has extended himself to interweaving the processes of consciousness and thought and the transformation of psychic, emotional, and mental sets, with the processes of dance, and his whole work is a growing series of brilliant transformations of cinematic movement itself."[16]

Emshwiller connected the exploratory process he uses in making works to the theme of diversity and collage:

> *For me, the making of a film is an experience in relationships, not only in what I am creating, but also in the process. And in the process, one of the things that is important to me is (...) spontaneity and lack of control — awareness, a sensitivity to what might be, my possible evocation, in those [relationships] that I am dealing with and/or an awareness*

13 Carnegie Museum of Art Archives, Lecture and Press Conference with Independent Filmmaker Ed Emshwiller [2/17/1971], Fv001 002 006 B Access https://records.cmoa.org/things/f65699a9-0f35-48bf-b63a-314b2aceeb35/ 14:57

14 *ibid* 32:16

15 https://www.roberthaller.com/galaxy/galaxy.html#ret15

16 "Our Space in Our Time: The New American Cinema," in *The American Cinema* ed. Donald E Staples [Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, United States Information Agency, 1973], p. 242.

of the environment so that I can respond to it and incorporate it — material that is totally out of my control — and find ways of utilizing it and making it relevant to what I am about. That combined, and juxtaposed against — in comparison to (almost) — those things that are highly defined, controlled, and rigid. There are sections of the film where the dancers are doing certain movements, for instance, that are shot on a 1:1 ratio.[17] *I said "Do this. Do that." They did this. They did that. There are other sections where I shot 20 or 30:1.*[18] *I had no idea what would happen today. I'd just go out and shoot. This is all part of my life. There are some things I can control and some I can't. And that's the way I want to face my films. I want to incorporate the whole of that into my work (...) That film, for that reason, is very typical to my approach to filmmaking right now. It reaches, insofar as I am able to express it personally, the spectrum of my perceptions and limitations in control and lack of control.*[19]

Jonas Mekas, in a truly ecstatic report on seeing Emshwiller's *Carol* and *Film with Three Dancers*), offers stunning riffs on the response Emshwiller offered to two questions from the audience at the Jewish Museum, where the films were shown. Mekas begins by remarking on what Emshwiller claims his principal task to be:

"His main work, as a filmmaker, consists of 'wrestling with the environment.' Which leads to the essence of Emshwiller's work. (...) He sees a woman's hair, and he has to exhaust himself in its optics. He doesn't show us the daily, down-to-earth reality of the woman's body (as Brakhage would do), no: Emshwiller abstracts it, he looks at it as if he were a lens, with no visible feeling or memory. He sees it as a flowing mass of thin soft silky substances in motion, in light, in space. (...)

Ideally he'd like to eliminate all interference of the camera, he'd like to 'dream it,' to 'look it.' He doesn't want the camera to become more human, no. What Emshwiller really wants is to become a camera himself! (...) Only a madman could think he's a camera, only a madman. Emshwiller is mad, truly mad. Only mediocre craftsmen are like everybody else. The truly great craftsmen are creatures with demons at their service. And thus the borders of art and craft disappear in the mystery of created and found reality."[20]

The author of these notes wishes to thank Pip Chodorov for his great help in preparing this piece.

17 Meaning he incorporated all the footage he shot into the final work. [RBE]

18 Meaning he incorporated one-twentieth or one-thirtieth of the footage he shot in the final film. [RBE]

19 *op cit* 13 16:48

20 Jonas Mekas "On Emshwiller and the Power of the Lens," *Movie Journal*, June 25, 1970, in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959—1971* [New York, NY: Collier Books, 1972], 386—8;)